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Ops Group offers spouses close look at 'war'

By T.C. Bradford

Guardian Staff Writer FORT POLK, La. - The Joint Readiness Training Center's Operations Group headquarters building contains a room they call "the foundry." It is a briefing room where Soldiers conduct military business, but April 5 it was filled with a different kind of Soldier - the military spouse.

It's been said that being a military spouse is one of the hardest jobs on the planet. They are the ones left behind during deployments to take care of the house while their Soldier is placed in harm's way for abstract concepts like democracy and freedom. When duty calls, they are the ones who explain to the children why daddy or mommy isn't home.

They are the ones asked to pack up and move every few years, uprooting their lives and leaving friends and family behind to face the unknown at a new duty station. Often, perhaps because the Soldier doesn't want the spouse to worry or because of operational security, Soldiers can't talk too much about their jobs.

Ops Group has developed a solution to that problem. They take the spouses out to the Soldier's "work place" to let them see exactly what they do to earn their paychecks.

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TOUR 2/2/2 Capt. Cathy Massey, commander, Headquarters Company, Ops Group, said the program was started in March and is a great opportunity for family members.

"Colonel Kevin Owens, Operations Group commander, allowed the Ops Group family tours so family members can view the training area and observe situational training first hand," she said.

“This is a fantastic chance for family members to see and understand a small part of what their Soldier and Ops Group do to conduct realistic and intense training.”

After a briefing at “the foundry” where they are welcomed to Operations Group and given an overview of JRTC and its mission, the spouses, and a few children, load up in vans for the long trip out to the training area.

Brett Axelberg, who took the tour, is the spouse of Lt. Col Marc Axelberg, a former observer/controller. Axelberg said she finally got a glimpse of JRTC’s “big picture.”

“I’ve wanted to do this for a long time. It’s our second time stationed at JRTC. (As a spouse) you learn bits and pieces if you care enough to pay attention to your spouse,” she said. “But this (tour) puts it all together and I learned a lot of facts.”

Axelberg learned that the number of roleplayers at JRTC has increased ten-fold and “wars” fought here are not only American affairs.

“I think a lot of people didn’t know that we bring Iraqi-born and Afghani-born citizens here to roleplay,” she said. “I think it’s really important to show that it’s not just Americans, that it’s an effort between us and citizens of those nations that care enough about those left behind to want to help.”

Massey said the tours have been a success. She said both family members and Soldiers have been positive and appreciative of the chance to see training take place and learn what their Soldiers do.

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TOUR 3/3/3

“The tours are beneficial to the family members to comprehend the challenges and seriousness of their Soldier’s responsibility to train rotational units and teach, coach and mentor Soldiers and leaders to perform at the highest level,” added Massey.

Family members are given a copy of the “Talatha Times” during the tour. The Times is a newspaper used in training, written from a civilian point of view. It reports, sometimes with an anti-American bias, the events that take place daily throughout the training area and is used to instruct leaders on how media coverage on the battlefield can affect the battle for the hearts and

minds of the citizenry. This is just one tool Ops Group uses to make the training as realistic as possible for rotational units. The realism was one of the things that impressed Axelberg.

"I'm very fascinated by all the detail, all the little pieces that come together to make the training realistic," she said. "The things the roleplayers do, the moulage (realistic looking wounds that role players are equipped with to simulate the effects of battle or a terrorist attack) - get the Soldiers used to the effects of war so they can go immediately into action without being shocked or stunned into inaction."

Massey said she enjoys the tours and the interaction with the family members and that, in the end, it all goes to help the Soldiers.

"The uncertainty and danger of deployments and training can be frightening for Army family members," she said. "Allowing families to witness the work their Soldiers do to defend our country gives them insight into the rewards and challenges the Soldiers face. It will make them even more proud of their Soldiers."

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Capt. Cathy Massey, commander, Headquarters Company, Ops Group, and Brett Axelberg get briefed on operation of the situational training exercise lane.



Brett Axelberg (middle) and other spouses go through a question and answer session with “Hassan,” an Iraqi-born role player.

All Photos taken by T.C. Bradford